

# A PEDAGOGY FOR IMPROVING WRITING AND THINKING

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**ABSTRACT** *Tertiary students are expected to undertake many written assignments which form the basis of most of their assessment at university. While the courses they take assist them with understanding content and issues related to their subject of study, it is rare for students to be assisted with the writing process concomitant with the acquisition of subject knowledge. The programme discussed in this article is an attempt to enhance students' thinking and writing through a collaborative approach to drafting, peer editing and essay writing. Outcomes of the programme are discussed in terms of the impact upon students' critical thinking, autonomy and collaborative learning.*

## INTRODUCTION

How can we help students to improve their writing and their thinking? How might the dual goals of student autonomy and critical thinking be fostered through collaborative learning and peer feedback? This article describes a process-based approach to the writing of essays which attempts to provide some answers to these questions. This drafting, peer editing and writing programme was a joint undertaking of the lecturers in a Professional Practice course in the School of Education at the University of Waikato, and two staff members from the Teaching and Learning Development Unit. The programme avoids a prescriptive approach and engages students in collaborative learning, critical thinking, giving feedback and taking responsibility for their learning. The critical evaluation of the programme is based on lecturer observation, informal student comments and 70 student responses to a questionnaire.

Our rationale for the programme was, in the first place, to integrate the development of writing skills and the learning context. While many academics resist the notion of teaching writing and thinking 'skills' within a discipline, there are cogent reasons for the view that learning to write articulately about a subject cannot be separated from the acquisition of knowledge about the subject itself. As Ballard and Clanchy (1988) argue, "Language whether oral or written, is indivisible from the culture in which it functions." ( p. 7). Our joint undertaking of this concept acknowledges the inextricable association between the development of intellectual understanding of a subject and the capacity to express this understanding fluently. Related to this conviction is our belief that writing tasks can be maximised as learning and thinking opportunities, if attention is shifted from the final product to the process.

Within this broad framework, we were interested to investigate whether the process of drafting and peer editing for essay writing might have some further specific pedagogical advantages. We wanted to see whether allowing students to unpack the writing process with their peers, and test out their writing against the

judgement of their peers, fostered other pedagogical goals. Most university academics would acknowledge these goals as fundamental to the agenda of tertiary study (e.g. School of Education, 1994). These goals are:

- the development of critical thinking skills
- the readiness of students to take responsibility for their own learning.

In addition, we wanted to examine the way students responded to the collaborative nature of the project and to observe the relationship between this collaboration and the quality of the learning experience.

## **OVERVIEW OF THE PROGRAMME**

In this programme students spend four weeks working on their current essay assignments within the tutorials. Some time is given to the formal components of an essay, such as introductions, paragraphing and linking, but the main thrust of the programme involves students working together on the various aspects of the writing process. Students are given the opportunity to explore the possibilities within the essay questions through group analysis of the topics and brainstorming activities. Further discussion focuses on evaluating the brainstorm and gradually distilling specific sections of the essay for more detailed development. In the course of this process many of the critical ideas and issues underlying the topics are also aired and debated. While the groups engage in discussion, the lecturers move around the room. The role of the lecturers is to participate in discussion and help students to test out their ideas in the context of the topic and their classroom experiences. After this intensive groundwork in groups, which may continue for up to two class sessions, individual students attempt the first draft of a few paragraphs of their essay. It should be emphasised that all through this programme the actual writing is an individual enterprise.

In the second half of the programme, students spend most of their time sharing their writing with their peers and giving and receiving editorial feedback. Students are prepared for the peer editing phase by a discussion of constructive feedback practices, and are also given written guidelines with suggestions for editing. Students are encouraged to work with editing partners, and to identify those aspects of their writing on which they seek feedback. Within a class session we recommend that students try to get feedback from three different editing partners. In the first instance the feedback will be on draft paragraphs, and in the final session students will elicit editorial feedback on the draft of their entire essay. Outcomes of the programme are discussed in the following sections, in terms of the impact upon students' critical thinking, learner autonomy and collaborative learning.

## **FOSTERING CRITICAL THINKING**

The ability to think and write critically is a valuable and essential aspect of teacher education. Ramsay and Oliver's (1994) study of teacher quality found that the outstanding teachers in their case studies were highly critical in their thinking. They read widely, were well informed and incorporated research findings with

their practice where appropriate. Alongside this awareness of research they exercised a healthy scepticism, balancing what they read with their practice to develop innovative and informed pedagogy. They also had the capacity to change their practice after critical reflection. As such these teachers exemplified critical thinking as Rowe (1994) intends:

Critical thinking...is a practical reflective activity that has reasonable belief or action as its goal. There are five key ideas here: practical, reflective, reasonable, belief and action...critical thinking is reasonable, reflective thinking that is focused on deciding what to believe or do. (p. 2)

Rowe (1994) emphasises the application of critical thinking to actual outcomes in thought and action; in raised awareness and in praxis. Critical thinking is acknowledged as both an important intellectual competency and a substantial contribution to one's judgement, belief and attitude. Developing this critical awareness requires more than just 'training' students in particular thinking skills. It requires appropriate contexts and situations that encourage the recognition and development of critical thinking. It requires contexts which are meaningful for students so that they can engage readily with the material. In addition, critical thinking requires students to do more than recall information but to think issues through, a process that initially, many find difficult and threatening (e.g., Stice, 1987).

Creating an appropriate for context for students to engage with the essay material and think issues through was an important rationale for our programme. We were interested to see how the collaborative process affected the students' ability to think and write clearly (for a reader) and critically (for an informed reader). Brookfield (1987) states that the hallmarks of critical thinking are the ability to challenge assumptions, take cognisance of context, imagine alternatives and exercise reflective scepticism. Aspects of these were evident when the students were engaged in the process of brainstorming ideas and giving peer feedback. For example, one group were discussing their essay topic on assessment and a student volunteered that portfolios were a useful form of assessment as they provide direct evidence of what a child has done. Another student suggested that this depended on whether or not the child had been involved in selecting the item for the portfolio and whether it had been discussed with them. Another student added that it would further depend upon the purpose for including that piece of work in the portfolio, whether it was chosen to reflect work in progress or a finished product. Yet another rejoined that a teacher would need to date and comment on the significance of the piece of work so that it made sense in context. One student added that it would be inappropriate if the portfolio became some form of 'brag book' of best work rather than a tool for acknowledging what and how children have learnt. Further comments from students regarding the affect of the programme on their thinking included the following:

[my ideas about the essay topic are now] more in depth - they weren't well thought out at all before this process

Before doing this programme I thought my ideas were wild - completely off the question

It was interesting to hear other views/ideas, making me think of the topic in another way

It [the process] made me think more in depth and got me organised so I could properly think about my opinions in relation to the literature

I was inclined to do more research on the topic

Initially it [the process] made me think about it [the essay topic] in greater depth, but I hope that when it comes to the final copy I am able to form definite opinions and conclusions

Engaging students to think and write critically requires more than class discussion and debate. It requires more than assignment questions which state 'critically discuss'. It requires more than knowledge of a particular subject and attendant issues. It seems to require a thorough and grounded approach to understanding the semantics of critical thinking and engaging in critical consideration of material in a supportive and challenging environment. It also requires that students learn to learn from people with whom they may disagree. It is too easy to dismiss ideas we do not personally agree with and adhere to concepts that match our beliefs. An emphasis on critical thinking and writing provides a basis for developing an informed opinion that avoids the automatic rejection of ideas that confront and challenge our assumptions. It also provides a basis for strengthening or moderating what one does believe.

## **LEARNERS ASSUMING RESPONSIBILITY FOR THEIR OWN LEARNING**

A recurrent theme in contemporary scholarship on tertiary learning is the importance of focussing on the learner and of creating a learning environment which encourages learners to assume responsibility for the progress of their own learning. Ramsden (1992), for example, contends that "good teaching fosters this sense of student control over learning and interest in the subject matter" ( p. 100). Likewise, noting the emphasis on self-directed learning in current scholarship, Boud (1995) argues that "it is fundamental to higher education that students learn to become independent of their teachers and that they should be placed in circumstances in which they are expected to make decisions about what and how they learn more often than is commonly the case at present" ( p. 27).

The format of our writing programme is designed to encourage students to assume greater ownership of the essay writing process. By deconstructing essay topics in groups and brainstorming ideas for essays, students are encouraged to become partners in the writing process. They can sound out their ideas with their peers, test the concepts against their own experience and through extended conversation discover more about personal and professional issues and concerns. This process can increase students' motivation and interest as they begin to make the task meaningful and worthwhile for themselves (Boud, 1995). From our

observations, students generally engaged very readily in the stages of reflective discussion, and our role as lecturers was to ask questions, to make suggestions, to probe and redirect ideas, but not to tell the students what we thought they should be doing and thinking. There were some students who initially felt reticent to deconstruct the topics, some explicitly expressing the fear that they would be penalised if they did not offer the 'right' answer. In a culture that generally focuses on the final written product, some students are reluctant to trust their own judgement and engage with the learning process. Working in a group with the involvement of the lecturers helped to allay some of these reservations.

Some advocates of learner autonomy might argue that as long as the writing tasks are formulated by the teacher, the potential for learner autonomy is limited. Baume (1994), for example, argues for the importance of learners determining their own goals. According to this line of thought, learning autonomy could be enhanced if students could negotiate an area of interest or topic with the teacher. Advocates of this approach claim that the learners have an interest in, and ownership of, their writing from the outset. While our process is not as far reaching as this we would argue that students still enjoy the opportunity to make more choices than is conventionally the case in written work.

In the peer editing phase, students have the opportunity to receive feedback from their peers which is formative, constructive and generally non-punitive. This contrasts with the more typical university procedure in which feedback only happens summatively and in conjunction with a grade. In the peer editing sessions students have an enhanced opportunity to share in the feedback and learning process and to extend their ownership of the writing process. What is more, during our programme they receive marks for taking part in the peer editing process (as well as the final essay) to support the importance of process. One student commented that getting marks for the draft was the most valuable part of the process. Whilst this may seem a rather pragmatic response it does underpin how assessment should and can be part of the learning process.

As students work with a number of editing partners, they accumulate a number of observations, comments and questions from their peers. Writers can then sift through the peer commentary and use or modify it according to their own judgements. The responsibility for making choices about writing is thus handed over to the students, and they have ample opportunity to refine their writing and thinking in the course of the writing process. The writing process can in this way nudge students towards self-reflection about their expression of ideas and prompt them to monitor the quality of their work.

Not all students will be willing partners in the learning process as many educational innovators will testify. At the beginning of the programme many students were still looking to the lecturers for affirmation of their ideas, but this dependency declined with time. Another reservation, is that some students failed to respond to the invitation to engage with their peers in discussion and editing. For example, some students did not write their draft paragraphs in time for the class session. Our observations suggest that the students who were unmotivated were the exception, and not the norm. It should also be remembered that students had to make considerable adjustments to our approach, as they operate in an environment which generally focuses assessment on finished products. Feedback

from the students included the following which indicate their level of ownership of the process:

If you come prepared [to each class] a lot was gained

I felt more responsible than if we hadn't done peer drafting as after our draft we have to go and correct OR consider corrections

We want to continue with these peer editing groups next year - it seems a really helpful process

I was already peer editing before this but didn't realise it was OK. I thought that maybe it was cheating or something to get someone else to look at your work and give you feedback

In addition, there were frequent comments made about how the programme had improved their time management and organisational skills:

[My ideas about the essay topic are more] thorough and elaborated

[The peer editing and drafting] allowed time to think over the essay and re-write parts, clarify ideas etc

It was good because I felt I had to keep up with everyone else and there was a set deadline for the draft, which meant I HAD to do one, which would be acceptable for everyone else to read...

[The most valuable part of the process has been] having certain things due each week so that everything is not left until the last minute

Having peers who are enthusiastic and having deadlines for each part of the essay was good to get it completed. No night before stuff for the entire essay

There is a tendency in universities and schools to emphasise content coverage and this can be at the expense of understanding and ownership by the learner (Ramsden, 1992). It appears from these comments that students felt less constrained by time and consequently spent longer thinking through the ideas and issues.

## **COLLABORATION IN THE LEARNING PROCESS**

For some students, the effort of writing appears to block their ability to express ideas clearly and critically. Students' drafts were shared in pairs and they identified aspects of their writing they wanted feedback on from their editing partner. During this process the interaction enabled the students to generate new ideas, to consider alternatives, to shift their thinking in the light of persuasive evidence or to consolidate their understanding. Their ideas were shaped by their

own thinking and experiences but also by their social discourse. The social construction of knowledge is receiving increasing attention as the work of Vygotsky (1978) continues to influence educational research and theory development. Rowe (1994) concurs with Vygotsky's main premise:

More recently, we have come to recognise the importance of social interaction in the formation of thought. To a large extent, thought emerges as a social process and is 'internalised' by the individual only after it has been expressed socially. A substantial proportion of our ability to think originates outside ourselves. Interaction and interchange of ideas in discussion with others is essential. (p. 2)

The opportunity to share their ideas and challenge each other's assumptions provided a social forum for the development of critical thought. Some 'ground rules' for discussion had been introduced earlier e.g., to challenge and 'tug' at ideas, not people; to consider alternatives but ask for clarification and justification rather than accept uncritically (e.g., Bellanca & Fogarty, 1991; Johnson & Johnson, 1994). Student comments included:

It really made you clarify your thinking to explain your ideas to someone else

At first it made me feel nervous - I thought, "Oh no!"

It's hard to get a balance between giving constructive feedback and being positive...you don't always know how far to go

I don't like others reading my work and I don't like criticising others, even constructively

Such comments reveal their concerns and their sensitivity about the process. They were generally concerned with giving feedback that was helpful rather than destructive. Learning to and practising giving feedback seem important skills for future teachers who interact with children, parents and caregivers and are required to give feedback on learners' progress.

Whole class discussion following the group sharing revealed a high level of debate and further questions arising from the topics that puzzled and concerned them. Definite and absolute summations of issues were noticeably absent. Instead, a growing tolerance for ambiguity and complexity was evident as they seemed to realise that contesting ideas often produces uncertainty. A student commented that before doing the programme she thought that her ideas about the essay topic were *"very decided and straightforward"*. Once she had completed the programme she commented that, it is *"a lot more complex - a wide issue"*. Furthermore, the collaborative process engaged the students in practising the art of enquiry (Ramsden, 1992) as they articulated their views and probed each other's thinking. This collaborative enquiry was generally welcomed by the students e.g.,

Getting feedback is really good. It boosts your confidence and helps you to think of alternate things you could do for the weak points

It does help to have someone else with a different stance on the topic, view what you have written and find advantages/disadvantages you may not have previously considered

The most challenging part was reading into where another person was coming from in their argument/criticism of topics

Another corollary of this group process was the incidence of peer tutoring which emerged naturally as students sought clarification from each other. Through peer tutoring one student can scaffold the learning of another (Vygotsky, 1978). For example, one student commented after they had received feedback from their peer on their writing:

I would never have found those things [in my writing] without someone saying

Such comments reveal how peer editing can help a writer to see their work afresh and improve aspects they have been oblivious to. The benefits for the tutee include the understanding of a concept in a way that makes sense to them i.e., peers can often clarify a concept in words that are readily understood. Lecturers can inadvertently phrase concepts in ways that are obscure or complex for neophytes. Peer tutors also benefit from their role as the process of assisting another clarifies and sharpens one's own thinking as evidenced in the student comment mentioned above. However, peer assisted learning can also be a site for misinformation (like the 'cafeteria rumour' which takes on a life of its own) as the students' beliefs can be biased and unsubstantiated. The role of the lecturer remains crucial in helping to challenge and clarify issues with students but not to dominate and judge those ideas and issues. It is a delicate balance for the lecturer who needs to prompt, probe and challenge but who needs to resist the temptation to 'give answers'.

Co-operation in the learning process is also a necessary attribute for teachers to foster. The positive effects of cooperative learning have long been established in the literature (e.g., Hill & Hill, 1990; Johnson & Johnson, 1987; Slavin, 1983). Initially the findings of such research focused on the acquisition of low level skills by cooperative groups but more recent studies are finding that cooperative efforts can be superior to competitive or individualistic efforts when the task is ill-defined and complex (e.g., Qin, Johnson & Johnson, 1995). For teachers, this seems particularly relevant. Not only are teachers expected to foster social and cooperative skills amongst the children they will teach (Ministry of Education, 1993) but it is a vital professional skill concomitant with their need to write well. Students sometimes query the purpose of essay writing and the academic skills required e.g., "When are we ever going to need this?". Some did query this during the writing programme described here and questioned the purpose of working collaboratively e.g., one student commented, "*I don't need this, I know what to put in my writing*". However, the skills and process developed in the programme are



useful for a range of writing tasks for the duration of teachers' careers. These tasks may include: responding to the Ministry of Education about draft curriculum documents and proposed policy changes; writing proposals to Boards of Trustees; writing policy documents for school schemes and writing applications for funding. All of these require the very skills and processes mentioned here. They also usually require a collaborative effort with colleagues, at least at the planning stage, rather than totally solo efforts. As such the programme described provides a basis for this ongoing professional craft. Stover (1986) states that writing assignments should "allow future teachers to function across the entire spectrum of discourse from interior monologues to essays" (p. 23). The steps involved in this programme assist students with making their interior monologues explicit and adapt these for readers.

## CONCLUSION

Peer assisted learning with the writing process enables the students to give and seek feedback from each other, to collaborate on and contest ideas and to develop their writing as reader, rather than writer centred. It is little wonder that this emphasis on process can be uncomfortable for some when they are part of an educational system which tends to reward final products (essays, reports, case studies, critiques, exams, tests etc) rather than process. This process based pedagogy challenges the assumptions that learners may have about the purposes of assessment and learning. It enables students to view learning and assessment as integral to each other. However we are also patently aware of the importance of product. The process needs to be underwritten by the goal that the completion of the final product provides. Whilst we commenced this programme with the process uppermost in our minds we acknowledge that the product has a vital role to play. It provides a motivating spur to the process, helping to focus their writing and sharpen their discussion. On reflection we believe that the process and product are interdependent and provide reciprocal benefits. That is not to say that a final goal is the most important aspect but rather that a goal helps to make the process meaningful and motivating.

Furthermore we were struck by the way in which writing about this process and concurrently teaching students to partake in it, heightened our awareness of what was occurring and our attention to detail. It seems that our own learning processes were enhanced by the goal of recording the programme and its outcomes for others. The iterative process of teaching and writing reflectively about the process had the benefit of enriching both our teaching and our writing. In the culture of universities, the oral is often separated from the written. This programme enables these language modes to enhance each other for the benefit of both students' and lecturers' learning.

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